I. INTRODUCTION.

I used to think I was POOR.
Then they told me, I wasn't poor, I was NEEDY.
Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, I was DEPRIVED.
Then they told me deprived was a bad image, I was UNDERPRIVILEGED.
Then they told me underprivileged was overused, I was DISADVANTAGED.
I still don't have a dime. But I have a GREAT VOCABULARY. (Feiffer, 1975:4)

A. The Scope.

Like most other classrooms world-wide, the typical Indian classroom also falls into the bell shaped statistical curve; the rising bulk in the middle represents the majority group of the average students, while the tapering lines at both ends represent the gifted and the disadvantaged learners. The exigencies of the classroom procedures and pragmatic considerations make it inevitable for the teachers of a mixed ability class, to focus attention on the majority group. The instruction and classroom activities are bound to match the intellectual level of this majority group. While such a pragmatic decision does not
adversely affect the gifted students, who have other extra-school forms of support in their learning enterprise (e.g. parental guidance, peer pressure, high motivation, special tuition, initiation to techniques of self-learning etc.), the disadvantaged group suffers severely when the teachers write them off and ignore their special needs. Such students who enter the tertiary level institutions with a failure syndrome soon find these institutions reinforcing their disadvantagedness.

No committed teacher, for whom education is an instrument of social transformation and a tool to bring about a just social order, can afford to ignore this swelling number of students in our classrooms. The problem of neglecting so many students assumes added significance in a developing country like India, as the Herculean task of lifting a nation by its very boot straps can only succeed if it is a concerted effort; such a task can hardly be accomplished if a sizable number of its population remain passive spectators and bystanders. The task before us is to bring the marginalized groups into the mainstream through enlightened education.
Arguably, these neglected group of learners in our classrooms, come from the very groups of our Indian population that get marginalized but ought to be the focus of our special attention if we are serious about the process of technological modernisation that calls for a scientifically trained man power. Now, these sectors that are educationally neglected and economically backward today, could be said to comprise the agricultural labourers in the rural area, the unorganised sectors in the urban area and in general those from the lower castes. The rural population constitutes 76.69 per cent of the total population of India but has a literacy rate that is almost half the urban figures; compared to the general population, the SC/ST community of both the rural and urban sectors has a significantly lower literacy rate (A.K. Singh 1985:179). And the proportion of workers with matriculation or higher level is as low as 2.56 per cent in the rural and 3.96 per cent in the urban population (Reddy 1988:3). There can be little doubt that the unorganized labourers are hardly educated.
B. Rationale

If a breakthrough should be achieved, in the context of empowering the marginalized sections with a view to creating an egalitarian society, a country like India in the throes of a new-birth can ill-afford to neglect these students in our classrooms.

The need to evolve a strategy to help this group of learners becomes all the more urgent because of the large numbers of disadvantaged students who have begun to flock to our schools and colleges. The current rush is a sign of a new awakening among the disadvantaged sector and the result of the encouragement received from the government's laudable policy of protective discrimination, as well as the changed perspective to education, that has, happily, guided the admission policy of some of our colleges.

The government's laudable policy of reservation or protective discrimination for the backward classes aims at bringing them on par with the others by means of:

(a) political reservation (articles 330 & 332),

(b) reservation of seats in educational institutions (articles 15(4) & 29)
(c) reservation of government jobs
(articles 16(4), 320(4), 333 & 335).

This policy has yielded slow but happy results as more and more from these sections knock at the doors of the tertiary level educational institutions. But unfortunately, for a good percentage of them, higher education becomes a traumatic experience forcing some of them to drop out and others to stagnate and repeat their class. To illustrate the point with a single sub-group within the disadvantaged bracket, we turn to Shah (1990) who points out that out of the 92,775 undergraduate medical students from all the states enrolled in 1977-78, 8.4 per cent belonged to the S.C. and 1.9 to the S.T. communities. And for example, out of 42 SC students admitted in Raipur, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, only 4 were able to complete the course in the prescribed time of 4 1/2 years; 6 students took 6 years, 6 others 6-7 years; 7 students as long as 7 to 8 years while 3 students were rusticated and migrated to other colleges. The other 16 just had to abandon studies.

A similar fate awaits the entrants from this strata to the Jesuit colleges, in one of which the present researcher works and bases his research. Of late, the Jesuit colleges have decided to throw open the gates of their erstwhile elitist colleges to
learners from the disadvantaged segments of the society. Their recent call of 'preferential option for the poor' and the determination to promote and sustain learners from these sectors, though much delayed, is a welcome step. Unfortunately, like the government's reservation policy the Jesuit slogan too may end up merely with swelling the ranks of the disadvantaged learners in our classes. The temptation to rest content with this general libertarian principle is so real that there hardly appears any systematic effort to match their desire with appropriate pedagogic action.

Consideration as the above and the social imperatives of today's India, impels the researcher to explore the possibility of making equality of achievement possible for the disadvantaged learners in his college. Having grappled with the problem of teaching the lowest (C-stream) group of learners for nearly ten years now and having successfully implemented a couple of short term cross-sectional studies, he later pursued the matter during his PGDTE in CIEFL, Hyderabad and for his dissertation in M.A. at the Polytechnic of West London. These have sharpened his determination to evolve a pedagogical practice that would be both practical and practicable. The present attempt, would be rather in the nature of a pilot study, exploring the problem, drawing insights from relevant areas like sociology, psychology, general
education, ethnomethodology etc. and testing them out with special reference to English language learning. The outcome of this study, we hope, would help us to plan out a long-term programme for a much larger group, identified as needing educational enhancement. The challenge of educating the disadvantaged learners is a concrete problem faced first by the researcher himself and which could be replicated in the many other institutions facing similar problems. It is hoped the spin off from such an action research would help develop an appropriate methodology for a general programme of compensatory education.

D. Clearing the Ground:

1. The Concept of Equality

The principle of equality in educational institutions, would obviously get nullified unless it ensures quality of education to all the participants. It means in practical terms that unless the concept of equality spans the gamut of,

   a) equality of admission,
   
   b) equality of advancement, and
   
   c) equality of achievement,

the egalitarian ideal can never be reached.

   While equality of admission is the most basic stage that alters the gate-keeping function of
education, it forced the disadvantaged with their tremendous inherited handicap into an unequal race; in the last analysis, the equality of admission proves to be more harmful than helpful. Joseph (1985:14) rightly notes that in India "the practice of imparting education on a standardised pattern, the inevitable consequence of democratization of education, has not been successful, as is evident from the large number of failures and drop outs." More importantly, he draws attention to the fact that even the few disadvantaged learners, who have been through this educational training exhibit no real entrepreneurial and investigative capacity. Such a negative outcome can only further inequality and compel mass acceptance of privilege to the few.

Equality of advancement, therefore, is a prerequisite if the disadvantaged learners entering the portals of the institutes of higher learning have to achieve the ultimate equality in the job market and social acceptance. This stage basically ensures that teaching is customized and suited to the needs of these learners, gradually leading them on to a higher competence in learning. In the words of the Kothari Commission, such a phase should,

aim at correcting the basic errors,
raising the attainment level in the
subject or subjects, re-establishing the confidence of the students in himself and in his ability to succeed and creating for him new interests and motivation in his studies (1966:214).

Equality of achievement is the end product—the truly egalitarian principle which ensures that the initially disadvantaged learners end up with true equality of rights and resources. The principle cannot ask for total parity with other privileged learners; but it does expect these learners to achieve subject-specific skills commensurate with the specific studies undertaken as well as some general scholastic aptitudes. The final achievement ought to be more than a mere paper degree that is realizable in real life situations as both knowledge and as power. Achievement, then, is the acid test for the effectiveness of an educational programme for the disadvantaged.
2. English for Educational Enhancement

The discussion above is largely centred round the role of education in general in uplifting the disadvantaged section of the Indian population. Apart from the formative influences that accrue in the process of learning a foreign language, learning English language in the tertiary level has other greater gains like unleashing the educational potentialities and assuring success to the disadvantaged learners. The following paragraphs will make a case for learning English as a foreign language.

An English language teacher, in our country at the tertiary level has a tremendous advantage over all his fellow teachers. Being the medium of instruction, English cuts across the entire gamut of educational experience. A good command and control over English becomes imperative if a learner at the tertiary level has to master the disciplines.

There is no denying that English language is a central fact in our classrooms. Every subject is learnt through linguistic activities--through discussing, reading and writing. So, English deserves careful study if one is serious about academic success. Stubbs makes a good case for language teaching. As he points out:
Research on traditional, relatively formal, chalk-and talk-classrooms show that on an average, teachers tend to talk for about 70 per cent of the classroom time (Flanders 1970). If a pupil remains in school between the ages of four and sixteen years he might have over 8,000 hours of teacher talk to listen to. ... Teaching as we know it, is inconceivable without language. For us teaching and learning typically comprise linguistic activities such as: lecturing, explaining, discussing, telling, questioning, answering, listening, repeating, paraphrasing and summarizing. (1976:127)

That is why it is sometimes said that 'every teacher is an English teacher' and that 'every lesson is an English lesson'. And the expression 'educational failure is linguistic failure' suggests that if a student's language is considered inadequate then one has every chance of failing in the formal educational system whatever be the discipline one specializes in. In fact, many of the scholastic aptitudes called into play in general learning, such as the capacity to conceptualize, infer, deduce, the ability to progress logically and think discursively can all be acquired
and strengthened through the process of language learning.

Besides its importance in the classroom, English is relevant out of classroom too. Just as a member of the classroom, the learner as a member of the society has, as Freire (1972:71) puts it, to initiate "a process of understanding and controlling the reality around him." The mastery of English and in general linguistic performance—of analysing, synthesizing, persuasive presentation, refutation etc., are skills so essential for success in social life.

D. Definition of Terms

Much of the controversy over the meaning of the term 'disadvantaged' is the result of the very diffuseness of the term which is used by different authors to refer to quite varied issues and problems. It shall, therefore, be necessary to begin with a working definition at the outset as to who in this paper are meant by the term 'disadvantaged'. We might begin by stating that the study does not interest itself in learners with disorders of organic or psychogenic origin like the hearing impaired or the retarded or pathological learner. The focus of our attention will be the educationally disadvantaged, and
in particular those disadvantaged in learning English language.

From an educational perspective, the term disadvantaged as used here shall refer to learners with a particular set of educationally associated problems arising largely from and residing extensively within the socio-cultural factors. We mean those students who have failed to acquire a meaningful hold on the English language, i.e. a basic competence to decode and encode a simple idea, even after six years or more of exposure to English language teaching. These are the students denoted by so many different euphemisms like 'slow learners', 'academically deficient', 'culturally deprived', 'marginalized', 'first generation learners', etc.

The common temptation is to focus on an ethnic or socio-cultural group and recount the learning disadvantages particular to these and ascribable to their peculiar background. However, such an a priori assumption, besides being vague and hypothetical, often does not correspond to any one group of disadvantaged learners we encounter in our classrooms. Therefore, instead of starting with any hypothetical group of learners defined along the familiar sociological criteria, the study, to begin with, follows a caste/class neutral approach using only the academic
criteria to identify the poor performers in St. Joseph's college, Trichy, on the basis of the formative assessment spread over three months in their first semester.

The students of the first year degree class, for the purpose of learning English, are streamed into three groups i.e A, B and C on the basis of a diagnostic test at the time of their admission to the college. The streaming system unfortunately is not very rigorous, owing to innumerable administrative problems; but compounding all is the by now deliberate practice among some of producing deliberately erroneous language and answers, in the hope of getting placed in a lower stream and so to cruise along effortlessly in a lower stream.

Therefore, instead of blindly using all or some of the C-stream students per se, it was decided to identify the lowest 40 students from the C-stream on the basis of a formative evaluation during the first semester. In order to overcome the limitations in terms of validity and reliability of the tests conducted by the four different teachers handling C-stream, the marks obtained at the two common three-hour written tests comprising text-based, grammar and free-composition questions were computed. And those who had secured below 33 per cent in these two assessments were
identified as the disadvantaged learners. The linguistic competence of these cohorts appear genuinely low as seen from the following random samples (excerpted verbatim) taken from one of their answers in the diagnostic test. The question was: Describe in about 200 words your experiences on the first day in this college.

1. This college for beautiful good teaching, good profesor's. We have to strit. I come to first day. In this college arrangement in the meeting and History for in this college.

2. I am very feeling all the professors to teaching in the English.

3. I send for community hall start with program. Thair talking the principle and professors. Hence of know for the college of history.

4. The college operate in good. Study the students is good.

5. The first day college *** the we are all first person but first day ****, **** My first person, and **** go or the first day college.
E. A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Although the cohorts have been selected on class/caste neutral terms, their disadvantagedness cannot be accounted for, nor their language studied unless we look into the social, economic, cultural and affective factors as they impinge on their learning. A sociolinguistic perspective alone can do justice to the problems specific to these learners. So, this group is described in socio-economic terms, to enable the use of sociolinguistic insights in understanding the factors that go into the shaping of their language. This way we could cater to both the problems stemming from their social-structural properties as well as those that are in a generic sense interlingual.

We give below some of the important social and cultural factors that might enlighten us in the understanding of the disadvantagedness of these learners:

Table 1. Distribution of the disadvantaged learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>CASTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of the cohorts in the experimental group 40.
17

SECTORS

Organised 12
Unorganised 28

PARENTAL EDUCATION

Matriculation 35
Matriculation 5

PARENTAL INCOME

Rs.30,000 p.a.* 38
Rs 30,000 2

GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN

Rural 31
Urban 9

FAMILY MEMBERS

> 4 33
< 4 7

+2 ENGLISH MARKS

> 50 6
< 50 34**

* per annum.

** 11 of them have repeated their English examination, three of them thrice.

Now the operational tools available, in sociology for analysing society, (cf. Ogbu, in Feagans 1982:126) reflect three principal paradigms of describing a society. One is a functional model that bases the divisions in society on the roles and functions different classes perform and the different rewards they receive depending on the significance of their function to the system and the skill or the education they require. These factors can be computed on a multi-index scale (cf. Rickford 1986:215). Applying such a
function-based criterion to our cohorts might designate a possible homogeneity but would not include all those and only those who suffer the disadvantage, because in India disadvantage can be much deeper than economic and job prestige.

The second is peculiar to the Indian reality trying to account for the caste factor that so dominates every aspect of life. Mandal (1978) has evolved a caste scale based on socio-cultural and economic criteria. (see Appendix A) This much talked-about categorisation, by mixing up economic and cultural considerations (i.e. acquired and actual status) serves at best as a ready reckoner and fails to exclude those within the caste brackets who have broken loose from the shackles of economic, educational and other disadvantages.

The third option is a Marxian perspective dividing the society into segments of population on the basis of their relation to the means of production and power struggle. This conflict theory in fact helps us to group together "people with common economic 'life chances determined by market relations'" (Rickford 1986:27). Thus the unorganised sector, the landless, the uneducated and the ostracised etc. jointly can form a sociolinguistic group. This last perspective would do justice to our cohorts and provide a framework to
include all of them under one sociological label of disadvantaged and also enables us to speak of a shared socio-economic reality.

F. Methodology

With this particular group of disadvantaged learners in focus, in the rest of the paper, we shall explore and capture under manageable heads the different aetiological explanations advanced in literature on education and allied areas on the disadvantagedness suffered by certain groups of people. We hope to scrutinize and critique these theories per se as also see them translated into action in some programme or other of intervention; later we hope to evolve an adequate explanation, creating a new configuration of the critical factors thrown into relief by these theories and further refine them to be able to adequately account for the problems of the disadvantaged learners. The next stage would be to explore the theoretical underpinning of this pedagogical principle and enflesh them into classroom practices. It finally remains to verify the hypothesis made through purposeful empirical study.